



The Power Source

Igniting the Future of Florida



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Power Profile: Maria Gou

Environmental Division Manager

POWER Engineers

Maria, you are the Environmental Division Manager at POWER Engineers, can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you got involved in the energy industry?

With bachelor's and master's degrees in chemical engineering, I started my career as an environmental consultant focused on air quality permitting and compliance. I worked for clients from a broad range of industries—oil and gas, electric generation and miscellaneous manufacturing, for example—primarily in the Gulf Coast area. After joining a small start-up firm, my career evolved from technical project work to managing projects and clients. It was during this time I was promoted up through the organization, eventually serving as president and CEO.

About five and half years ago, POWER Engineers approached us to with an opportunity to join their firm. It was the perfect time to join a multidisciplinary engineering and environmental firm with the history, depth and resources to support clients in the energy space. I currently serve as the environmental division manager at POWER with a team comprised of project managers, environmental planners, biologists, archeologists, wetland scientists, geologists, air quality experts, geographic information system (GIS) analysts, visualization experts and public involvement specialists that understand the environmental and regulatory challenges our clients are facing as the energy landscape and energy demands change.

In a 2019 article the POWER Engineers CEO said, "she is constantly helping her team work better together, and we look forward to seeing her apply that mindset to an entire division." What are the traits of a great leader?

A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to work with an executive coach who took me through a self-awareness exercise; building a timeline of my career and reflecting on major milestones, both personally and professionally. I learned more about what I do in certain situations and why, how I react and respond, what drives my behavior as a leader and so on. It was a very powerful experience and reaffirmed for me what I believe are important traits of a great leader. In some areas I think I am doing well, especially those things that come naturally. Of course, it also identified things I need to work on to continue to grow.



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To me, a great leader creates a platform for collaboration and recognition. I think this is accomplished when leaders build trust by:

- Listening first
- Acting with courage
- Being authentic
- Being accountable

As I recall, that article also mentioned how I would fit right into POWER's servant leadership culture. At the time, I was not quite attuned to that definition, but I certainly embraced the "helping the team work better together." There are several books and articles written around the traits of servant leadership that are insightful and align with much of why I think these qualities makes a great leader.

You have an impressive career with over 25 years of experience in your field. Name one of your favorite projects and describe why?

One project that comes to mind involved preparing air permit amendment applications for a chemical plant in Texas. This was in response to new environmental regulations to account for and permit emissions related to start up and shutdown malfunctioning of chemical plant operations. The project was challenging for many reasons—the amount of work, the complexity of the calculations and the timeline.

Although difficult, this remains one of my favorite projects, as it involved working with many client contacts at the plant and multiple project managers and technical staff on our team. We also used fundamental engineering principles to develop the emission calculation methodologies since it was a new program with no prescribed calculation guidelines. I learned a great deal from the overall program manager on this project. It was an example of a situation where people skills, organization, communication and collaboration successfully came together.

Do you think there is more to be done to encourage women to enter STEM related careers? If so, provide your thoughts.

My thoughts on this center around retention at critical stages in life. Studies have shown that girls become interested in math and science around age 11, but then interest drops off around age 15. Other statistics I've seen are that approximately 40% of women who graduate with an engineering degree do not pursue jobs in their field and only 30% of those who do practice remain in the field after 20 years.

I'd like to see more opportunities and perhaps funding for universities and corporations to work with middle- to high-school age students to maintain that early level of interest. We need to re-enforce how the value of fundamental technical and scientific knowledge opens many doors. The problem-solving skills, hard work and tenacity learned through these programs help develop a can-do attitude that doesn't falter when things get tough.

This must be carried on into the college years, with more internships and opportunities to learn more about the field and the actual work. Mentoring programs, for example, are great ways to provide personal and



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professional development for young women that allows them to grow their technical and social skills. Similarly, networking with organizations, such as this Florida's Women in Energy Leadership Forum, provides resources and support for women to grow as professionals and expand their network.

Can you tell us one of the biggest challenges you have faced in your career and how you overcame it?

As I continued to move up in my career, the biggest challenges have been taking on new roles. I'm always learning. The hardest step for me was the first time I took on people management rather than project management. Transitioning from being a peer to a supervisor requires a different kind of courage.

All I knew to do was to be myself and lead from a position of caring for the team's wellbeing and career growth. Other aspects of the various roles I've taken on—from financials to human resources and legal—were areas I knew I would find support from others and skills I could learn.

What advice would you give to a second-year college student looking to start a career in the energy industry?

With so many opportunities in the energy field today, picking a path to follow can seem overwhelming. I encourage college students to seek out internships looking for a company with a good cultural fit, where individuals can develop long-term coaching relationships. When starting out in a firm, you won't always see where you are going or where your career will take you. My advice is to jump in! Do the things that come naturally and build on your strengths. Remember that your career will evolve and the technical skills will grow—it's a balance between being challenged and developing confidence in what you can do.